

# Armed & engaged

Do certain groups of children underachieve because their interests are regarded as taboo?

**Tim Kahn** explores the benefits of embracing weapon and superhero play, and asks what else might we need to reassess...

Last issue, I outlined how the issue of boys' under-achievement is more complicated than is generally portrayed. I argued that one should speak of some boys' under-achievement (and of some girls' under-achievement), recognising that one can only consider gender and achievement in conjunction with ethnicity and class.

This time, I want to look at a practical strategy early years settings can employ to potentially improve their children's outcomes. Lots of initiatives have attested to the importance of using males (as role models) reading to young boys. These are essential, but I will assume you are familiar with this idea, as I want to present another that also addresses the area of boys' and girls' under-achievement.

## Starting with the child

The EYFS states in Paragraph 1.9, "Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults." Then, in paragraph 1.10, it says, "In planning and guiding children's activities, practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice." In other words, effective learning for young children starts from their interests.

Practitioners instinctively and logically know this is true, and as a result, more and more settings now use their children's interests as the starting point for their curriculum. However, there is one area where this has traditionally not happened, and this was highlighted in 2003 by Penny Holland, an early years academic, in her book *We Don't Play with Guns Here: War, weapon and superhero play in the early years* (2003, Open

University Press). Holland recognised that a zero-tolerance attitude had grown up towards one area of the curriculum - that of war, weapons and superhero play - often indulged in persistently by boys (and the occasional girl). Although there was no policy forbidding such play, it was outlawed by settings in the unproven (and, many would now argue, 'mistaken') belief that it promoted violence in the children (mostly boys) who indulged in it, as well as disturbing the learning of others.

The unintended consequence of preventing such play was that those whose interests lay in that area might be turned off learning in its broadest sense (for example, developing their own self-esteem, as well as more formal curriculum skills) following the logic, "If my interests are not acknowledged by the setting, then I do not belong here." A child may go so far as to believe that there may be something wrong with him (or her) for only being interested in what is not permitted by the setting.

Challenging the notion that this kind of play is beyond the pale and incorporating it into the regular 'purposeful' life of a setting requires a

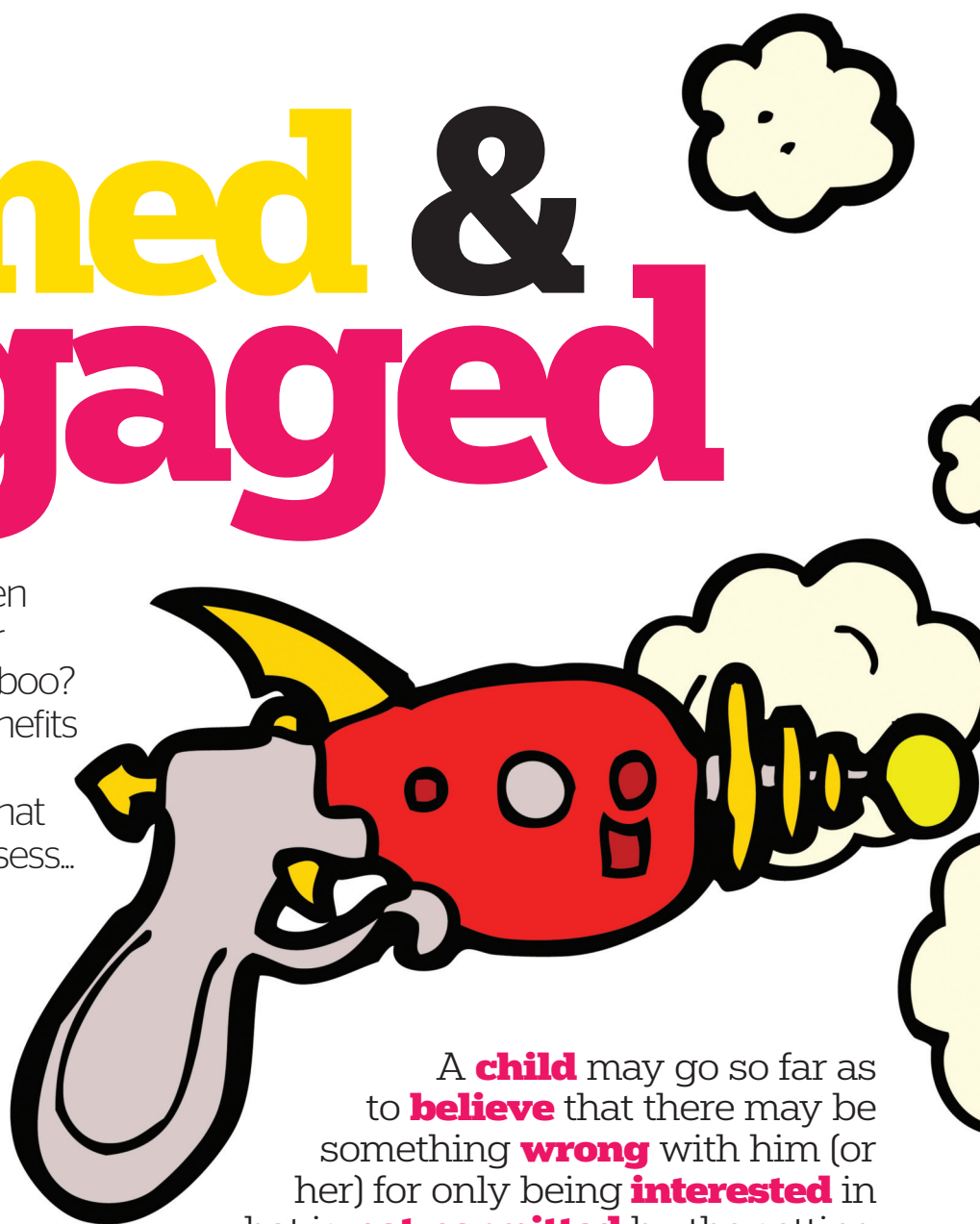
A **child** may go so far as to **believe** that there may be something **wrong** with him (or her) for only being **interested** in what is **not permitted** by the setting

reorientation of staff, parents and, of course, the children who have learned that it is unacceptable. Where settings have introduced such play, they have ensured that it is accompanied by very clear boundaries, such as 'nobody can be forced to join in such play' and 'hurting is not allowed'.

As can be seen in the case study below, all parties can grow to recognise that such play is beneficial to everybody - in settings and families. Today, 10 years on from when her book was written, Holland sees a significant number of settings using their children's interest in weapons and superhero play as a starting point for learning.

## Case study: Washwood Heath Nursery School

"There are about 100 children in our setting in the morning and another 100 in the afternoon," says David McCallin, deputy headteacher at Washwood Heath Nursery School in Birmingham. "For a long time we noticed that quite a few of the children engaged in rough and tumble/superhero/gun play. Probably 20 boys in each session



## Expand your knowledge

- See *Engaging Boys in the Early Years: The experiences of three Islington settings* – a report produced by Islington Primary Strategy Early Years Team (available at [tinyurl.com/TNIsboys](http://tinyurl.com/TNIsboys))
- Type 'Boys' achievements in early years' and related topics into your browser and explore the results.

- Read *We Don't Play with Guns Here* by Penny Holland.
- See the section on 'Concerns about boys' in *The XY Factor: Addressing gender issues in the early years*, a book I wrote for the Pre-school Learning Alliance. It summarises the issues raised in this (and the last issue's) article.

"Embracing this type of play has had a positive effect on relationships and cooperative attitudes between staff and children. Whereas before, some children hid their weapon and superhero play away, now they are approaching us with ideas to develop within their play. Since we've been embracing this kind of play we've noticed clear improvements in the children's speech and language, and we've also noticed deeper level learning and engagement in their play."

If you would like more information about Washwood Heath's approach to weapon and superhero play, you can get in touch by phone on 0121 464 1810 or email, [details-enquiry@washwdhn.bham.sch.uk](mailto:details-enquiry@washwdhn.bham.sch.uk)

### Seeing the benefits

Washwood Heath is far from the only example of an early years setting utilising their boys' interests to support learning. Wendy Colebourne, headteacher of Harrington Nursery in Derby, tells the story of one little boy who was playing with guns all the time when he came into nursery. She

says, "Even when we took him into the woods, all he was interested in was picking up sticks and using them for shooting. Rather than stopping him from doing that, we intervened and have developed that play."

Two or three months after the woods incident, Wendy reports, "We took him out into the snow and he was using sticks to explore, investigate and mark-make (which, of course, is one of the first steps of pre-writing)."

This kind of story follows on naturally from a practitioner attitude and mindset that uses children's own interests as the starting point for any learning. Wendy Colebourne has analysed her nursery's statistics. In the past, the figures showed that under-achievement followed ethnicity and gender. A few years after the setting started making a conscious effort to be guided by child-initiated play, whatever that play might be, the statistics no longer show this difference.

These examples suggest a need to look again at our conventional ideas around boys' and girls' learning, to see what other taboos may need revisiting. Improving the achievement of both genders, and particularly those from groups who continue to struggle relative to their peers, may be the prize for doing so.

wanted to continuously play in this way, and maybe half of all boys got involved in this play at some time – as well as the few girls that showed interest. For the past four years we have been investigating this area of play as a staff team, and for the last 18 months have been encouraging it as we have recognised its value and the learning that can arise from exploring it further. Some staff just don't feel comfortable with this kind of play – but the majority are on board and encouraging it every day.

"Initially, parents were quite concerned. They said that their children were quite physical at home and, if anything, they were having trouble stopping them fighting, often with siblings. They worried that this approach might 'spill over' and lead to more physicality at home, but it didn't seem to have that effect, possibly because the children played out and dealt with what they were thinking about at nursery, and so didn't need to take it home. In fact, a couple of parents talked about their children's language improving in terms of being more able to describe characters and a story line of what they were engaged in.



### about the author

Tim Kahn has worked with parents and families for some 20 years, including eight years spent working at the Pre-school Learning Alliance's national centre.